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SUBJECT: SERBIA ON THE EVE OF KOSOVO'S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

REFS: A) BELGRADE 62, B) 07 BELGRADE 1733, C) BELGRADE 150

Summary

1. (SBU) Serbia's leaders and activists are preparing for Kosovo's imminent declaration of independence and the European Union's decision to deploy a mission to Kosovo. Ruling parties plan to convene parliament to oppose both moves, while nationalist groups have announced protests calling an EU mission equal to an "occupation" of Kosovo. While the GOS is still finalizing how it will react, there are indications of what impact Kosovo independence will have in Serbia in the immediate, medium and long terms. End Summary.

Immediate reactions

2. (SBU) The GOS will react both politically and legally, based on the GOS "action plan" (ref a) and parliament's Kosovo resolution (ref b). While the plan remains, as DSS Vice President Milos Aligrudic told poloff February 12, a "state secret," an advisor in the Kosovo Ministry said the plan was generally based on the supremacy of UNSCR 1244 and its mandate for UNMIK (ref c). In a February 13 statement to a state news agency, Prime Minister Kostunica reiterated the provision in parliament's December 2007 resolution that the GOS will immediately "annul the unilateral Kosovo independence." He called it "historic...because it is Serbia's ultimate decision to reject the existence of a false state on its territory once and for all." Kostunica said that the GOS will then inform the UNSC and UN Secretary General that "all illegal acts of unilateral independence declaration have been declared null and void." Aligrudic told poloff, February 12, that the GOS would expect the UN, and UNMIK, to annul Kosovo's declaration of independence as well. On an encouraging note, Serbia's Chief of Defense Zdravko Ponos publicly reiterated that Serbian would not use military to respond to developments in Kosovo.

3. (SBU) According the February 13 edition of the pro-government daily "Politika," the Cabinet is meeting February 14 to discuss immediate actions against those governments that recognize Kosovo. A follow-on article further elaborated that the first step would be to recall Serbian ambassadors from capitals. There was no mention of downgrading diplomatic relations. Embassy's contacts earlier have said that the most severe response would be for those countries in the first wave of recognition. Serbian leaders have also said the GOS will increase investment in parallel structures in Kosovo. "Politika" also reported on February 13 that according to "unnamed government sources" these parallel institutions could last six to eight years. In Kostunica's February 13 statement, he called on Kosovo Serbs to remain in Kosovo and he promised GOS support. The GOS, he said, "considers every person in Kosovo an equal and fully legitimate citizen of Serbia, and it is our duty to do absolutely

everything to ensure normal living conditions for our people in the province."

14. (SBU) As a possible sign of things to come, the Kosovo Ministry was dismissive of post's repeated efforts for meetings this week. Elsewhere in the GOS, there was a sense of uncertainty about the path Serbia is on, and growing resentment within the ruling coalition. A contact within the avowedly pro-EU, Democratic Party (DS) Deputy Prime Minister's European Integration Office told econoff that the office questioned whether the name should be changed to the "Russian Integration Office" because of the Prime Minister's policies. In a February 12 meeting with poloff, a G17 Plus official called Kosovo Minister Samardzic "Serbia's Acting Foreign Minister." Nevertheless, both the DS and G17 have rejected the idea of leaving government over these differences.

15. (SBU) Serbia also intends to mount a last-ditch effort at the UNSC, with Russian support. MFA Political Director Boris Stefanovic confirmed to DCM that Foreign Minister Jeremic left February 13 for New York. A local UN Office representative (protect) told poloff, February 13, that the GOS had officially requested a UNSC meeting "soon" but that it all seemed to be orchestrated by Moscow. The GOS aim, it seemed, was for a meeting, possibly over the weekend, in order to get the Council to agree -- and inform the Secretary General -- that Kosovo's declaration of independence would be illegal, and that the UN should react accordingly (i.e. compelling UNMIK to annul Pristina's declaration).

Nationalist Reaction

16. (SBU) Two nationalist groups announced that they will stage a protest on Saturday, February 16, in front of the Slovenian Embassy in Belgrade to rally against the EU's plans to send a mission to Kosovo. The groups, "1389" and "Nasi," have advertised the

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demonstration as a way to equate the EU mission as the "occupation." Slovenian poloff told poloff, February 13, that his mission did not expect more than 300 protestors and they were not worried about violence or damage. The Slovene DCM, however, told EU DCMs at a February 13 EU meeting that the Slovenes were evacuating dependents. Apparently the Slovenian Embassy is the only EU embassy to evacuating dependents.

NGOs, U.S. Investment Worried

17. (SBU) Some groups, however, are concerned. President of the NGO Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Andrej Nosov, told poloff on February 13 that human rights NGOs were "running around, meeting with each other" to plan for post-Kosovo contingencies. U.S. Steel officials informed the embassy that it is permitting family members and dependents of international staff in Serbia to depart Serbia for neighboring countries for the next 7-10 days. U.S. Steel clarified that it took this action on its own accord and the decision to do so was made at U.S. Headquarters. It was not based on any credible threat, and is only precautionary at this stage, US Steel told the embassy. Normal US Steel operations in Serbia are expected to continue during this time.

Kosovo's Political Lifespan

18. (SBU) There are conflicting signs of how long Kosovo's independence will be a serious political factor in the GOS, Serbia's European future, and U.S.-Serbia relations. Srdjan Miljkovic, North Americas Division Chief at MFA, told poloff on February 13 that he expected the Kosovo issue to be the issue on the agenda for "two to three months." Miljkovic said he did not foresee problems on the working level on the days following a decision on Kosovo. In further clarification, he said he expected working level meetings and dialogue would still occur without any hindrance or delay. He acknowledged that Serbia would of course respond diplomatically at higher levels to any decision. It was obvious by his response that those specific actions had not yet been widely shared within the

Ministry. Ministry of Defense officials have assured DATT representatives that mil-to-mil cooperation would continue, though they acknowledged a strong DSS-orientation among some of the "older" officers.

¶9. (SBU) A political analyst at the pro-Western Balkan Trust for Democracy was more pessimistic. Filip Medic told poloff, February 13, that he saw a DSS-Radicals "shadow coalition" emerging from the internal divisions over Serbia's relationship with the EU. (Serbian Orthodox Church Bishop Artemije reiterated previous statements on February 13, calling for a "government of national salvation" with all political parties to oppose Kosovo independence and reject the EU offer.) Medic said the "nascent truce in the [DS-DSS] governing coalition...might prove very damaging to Tadic and the DS in the short to mid term" because the DS is still the flagship pro-EU party. Aligrudic similarly told poloff, February 13, that the DS-DSS differences over EU accession would remain as long as the EU insisted on sending a mission to Kosovo based on the Ahtisaari Plan.

Even more gloomily, Nenad Sebek, Director of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, told DCM on February 12 that by reconciling with the DSS, Tadic had "reached in to Kostunica's cold dark grave and brought him back to life." In this regard, Kosovo's independence will remain a serious political obstacle indefinitely.

¶10. (SBU) Similarly, "Politika" wrote on February 13 that the Kosovo issue was "strengthening" the government coalition and would keep it focused (distracted). The article did not give any indication on how long Kosovo would figure as the major issue on Serbian political scene, but assessed that other pressing issues -- such as EU accession -- would not return as politically relevant issues for up to six months (sooner if the EU offered an SAA, the paper wryly wrote.) "Politika" estimated that following a Kosovo declaration of independence, GOS parties would likely continue their agreed "united state politics" on Kosovo for at least a couple of months. In the following two to four months, Serbia would have to respond to UDI with a hard-line stance that there be neither contacts nor cooperation with Kosovo Albanians and government who recognize Kosovo independence.

Long-term Disruption

¶11. (SBU) Serbian officials have said publicly and privately over the last several months that the GOS will only consider legitimate those Kosovo institutions authorized by UNSCR 1244. According to "Politika," Serbia should resist all external pressures to sign individual agreements (i.e. on electricity or water) with the new Kosovo government. According to an "anonymous DSS source" for

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"Politika," the GOS would prohibit ministries from entering such agreements, as these would imply gradual recognition of independence. Agreements must only be made with UNMIK not the EU mission, and all communication on Kosovo-related matters must go through the UN, not the EU. "Politika" wrote that this state of affairs could last up to six-eight years, but Kostunica and those close to him have given no indication that this policy will ever change.

¶12. (SBU) Local and municipal elections planned for May 2008 will be the first major test as DS and DSS, along with all other parties, will have to encourage voters with domestic policy platforms and not entirely about Kosovo.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) In the short term, the Serbian government will push as hard as possible in the UN to try to stop a Kosovo declaration of independence. After Kosovo declares, parliament will annul it and the GOS will ask all international bodies to reject as well. The ruling coalition will remain united on Kosovo, particularly now that it has achieved consensus to delay any decision on the offered EU agreement. For the next weeks, it is not reasonable to expect Serbian leaders to focus on anything else. In the medium and long

term, the challenge will be to reintroduce the critical issue of Serbia's progress on European integration. The DS may profess it wishes to move the national political discourse back to European integration, but Kostunica will oppose this as long as he is Prime Minister and the EU mission remains in Kosovo. End Comment.

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